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SUBJECT: FIRST US-MALDIVES FRIENDSHIP WEEK A SUCCESS

REFS: A) COLOMBO 1716 B) COLOMBO 1706

1. (SBU) Summary: The first-ever US-Maldives Friendship Week ("Friendship Week") which took place on September 23-28 furthered the Mission Performance Plan (MPP) goal of stable and secure partners worldwide and enhanced bilateral ties in the political, economic, cultural and security realms. Building upon the success of its annual trade show run by the Commercial and Economic Section, Post added seminars on visas, educational opportunities, and human rights. A range of activities was on the docket: Ambassador and Emboffs signed grant agreements, conducted Fulbright interviews, exhibited a collection of photos entitled "Islam in America," donated book sets to several libraries, and screened hit Hollywood movies. A Navy P3 plane made a visit and its crew met with military counterparts. Post's "July 4" reception was hosted by the Ambassador and served as the opening event. The Ambassador and Emboffs paid calls on numerous GORM officials, including President Gayoom. End Summary.

2. (SBU) Post's MPP for the Maldives has one performance goal: pursuing stable and secure partners worldwide. Friendship Week was an opportunity to develop a closer relationship with this moderate Muslim nation, through commercial, consular and cultural programs, as well as many meetings with GORM officials.

3. (SBU) The Ambassador held a series of discussions with various government officials and political leaders, including President Gayoom, opposition Maldivian Democratic Party leaders, the Attorney General, the Home Affairs Minister, the Atoll Development Minister, and the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs (Ref A). During these meetings, the Ambassador noted the many difficult but important changes the GORM was attempting to undertake and emphasized the mutual responsibilities of government (to protect freedoms of speech and assembly) and political parties (to speak and assemble peacefully) in a democracy. He also received assurances from the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs that the GORM will move quickly to conclude the bilateral agreement on tsunami aid.

COMMERCIAL OUTREACH

4. (SBU) This year's trade show saw our highest participation yet by US companies. Food and beverage, IT, health care, water, power generation, personal care and transportation sectors were present. Companies or brands included Bell Helicopter, the California Table Grape Commission, Caterpillar, Commercial Lynks, GE, IBM, Kraft Foods, Microsoft, and Proctor and Gamble. As a result of this year's trade show, a participating US company has commenced negotiations to secure a multi-million dollar project with the Maldives government (GORM) for a desalinization plant. Several other companies reported increased possibilities for contracts in the future due to their presence at the show.

CULTURAL OUTREACH

5. (SBU) Post's Public Affairs section organized several events to generate goodwill and positive publicity, including an Ambassadorial press conference, a film festival of hit American movies and three separate book donations to schools and libraries. Two seminars were given on higher education opportunities in the US. In addition, Public Affairs sponsored a speaker on forensic sciences for the Maldivian Human Rights Commission and police. This was particularly timely in light of recent political events. PD also arranged the first ever grant to the Maldives from the Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation to help restore the 19th century Eid mosque. A full report on Public Affairs activities will follow septel.

CONSULAR OUTREACH

7. (U) The Consular Section gave a seminar on Diversity Visas to the US and another seminar on student and non-immigrant visas. Maldivians expressed considerable interest in student visas, educational opportunities and scholarships, both by those who attended the seminars, and through questions from 60 or 70 drop-ins at the trade fair. In addition to the seminars given by the Consular and Public

Affairs Sections, a US "educational opportunities" booth was set up at the trade show by Public Affairs. The Defense Attache's Office also provided information at the trade fair on appointments to US military academies.

SIDE MEETINGS AND ORIENTATION VISITS

18. (SBU) In addition to the Ambassador's discussions noted above, embassy officials held a number of useful meetings on the margins of Friendship Week. These included orientation meetings for the new Defense Attache and the new Regional Security Officer, as well as consultations with UN officials, and economic and commercial contacts. The crew of the Navy P3 plane, along with the Defense Attache, met members of the Maldivian military. South Asia's Environment, Science, Technology and Health Hub Officer from Kathmandu selected this week to conduct consultations on atolls development and tsunami-related matters.

19. (SBU) COMMENT: The Maldivian media gave widespread and extremely favorable coverage of the Friendship Week and of American culture (Ref B). This 100% Muslim country is extremely friendly towards the US. While it is a small island country with only 300,000 citizens, its ties with other Islamic countries and ongoing democratic reform process make it a country whose friendship should be maintained and developed. Numerous contacts made during US-Maldives Friendship Week, from schoolchildren to political party leaders to media contacts to business executives, made this week a success. Post learned a good deal this week, through contacts made as well as through the exercise of planning the week from Sri Lanka. This experience has underscored the potential value of an FSN position dedicated to the Maldives, as noted in the MPP. Another Friendship Week is planned for mid-2006, and we expect it will build on the success of our first Friendship Week.

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